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ABSTRACT

The paper compares some aspects of special education in Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and the Philippines. The relatively scarce and scattered sources of information are documents, the evolution of special education in each of the four countries is traced, and some of the problems involved in the planning and implementation of educational services for the exceptional or handicapped population are identified. (Author/SBH)

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SOME ASPECTS OF SPECIAL EDUCATION IN MALAYSIA, SINGAPORE, THAILAND AND THE PHILIPPINES

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Abstract

The majority of special education programmes have been established only in the last two decades, with the Philippines having launched the first special school in the region in 1907, followed by Malaysia in 1926, Thailand in 1930 and Singapore in 1947. Local religious and lay organizations have played a major role in pioneering and developing special education, and, later on, the government, initially through the Ministry/Department of Social Welfare and subsequently the Ministry/Department of Education, has taken over the responsibility. International agencies have also contributed valuable technical assistance. Special education has developed from a sheltered residential system to an ever expanding open integrated one in special day and regular schools. In terms of the variety of training programmes for special education teachers and administrators, organizational patterns, numbers and types of exceptional individuals served, the Philippines is ahead of the other three countries under review. Common problems include a shortage of

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professionally trained staff to identify, diagnose, teach and counsel exceptional children and youth and of administrators and supervisors, apart from the overall problem of inadequate funding.

This paper is based on parts of a Ph.D. dissertation by the writer (Chua, 1976). The doctoral study has attempted to compare some aspects of special education in Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and the Philippines with the purpose of documenting the relatively scarce and scattered sources of information, tracing the evolution of special education in each of the four countries under study, identifying some of the problems involved in the planning and implementation of educational services for the exceptional or handicapped population, recommending areas of special education for further consolidation and/or improvement and making suggestions for further research. The methodology includes library research, correspondence, questionnaires, interviews and visits to special education and training programmes in the four countries, followed by an analysis and interpretation of the data collected.

Nature and scope of special education

Special education in each of the four countries under study varies in terms of types of exceptional children and youth catered for, diagnosis, special media of instruction especially for the visually and the hearing impaired, training of special education teachers, the curriculum, special teaching-learning materials and equipment, individualized instruction and class-size, guidance and counseling, an interdisciplinary approach, organizational programs, the role of local voluntary and international agencies, the expenditure involved and the problem of a co-ordinated approach.

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Aims of Special Education

The expressed aims of special education by the Ministry/Department of Education in each of the four countries under review display common characteristics which are also shared by local private agencies dealing with exceptional children and youth. All agree that the aims of special education are the same as those for education in general, that the basic and special needs of individual exceptional children and youth have to be met, that a disability should be prevented from becoming a handicap, that personal, social and vocational adjustment are of paramount importance and that as far as possible the exceptional individual should be integrated in school and the community.

History of Special Education

Special education in the region has its modest beginnings only in the present century and has picked up momentum only in the last two decades. While religious and lay organizations played an important part in pioneering special education in Malaysia and Singapore, the government took the initiative in the case of the Philippines and Thailand. In all the four countries, the government, initially through the Ministry/Department of Special Welfare and subsequently the Ministry/Department of Education gradually assumed an increasing responsibility in providing both financial and professional support. International organizations have also offered financial and/or professional support (mainly in the form of consultants), notably the American Foundation for Overseas Blind (now renamed Helen Keller International Incorporated), the Royal Commonwealth Society for the Blind, UNICEF and ILO. Special education has developed from a somewhat segregated residential school type of environment to an open integrated system of education in special day schools and regular schools.

Prevalence of Exceptional Individuals

All the four countries under study face the problem of lack of information on actual numbers of various groups of exceptional individuals needing special

education. Surveys of prevalence rates have been carried in each country but they generally suffer from either gross underestimation or inaccurate projections. Based on both local and western sources, the writer estimates that there are 6.1 million exceptional individuals in the Philippines, 5.7 million in Thailand, 1.7 million in Malaysia and 0.3 million in Singapore, giving a 16 per cent prevalence rate of exceptionality in the general population. (See Table 1, p.7). In terms of the school-age population of 5-19 years, the Philippines and Thailand each have an estimated 2.6 million exceptional children and youth, Malaysia 0.8 million and Singapore under 0.2 million (See Table 2, p.8).

Enrolment in Special Education Programs

Enrolled exceptional children and youth number 7.7 thousand, 5.4 thousand, 1.9 thousand and 1.1 thousand in the Philippines, Malaysia, Thailand and Singapore respectively, representing only 0.29, 0.66, 0.07 and 0.68% of the estimated numbers that require special education respectively. (See Table 3, p.9). Among the various enrolled exceptional groups, the blind are the best served in each country in terms of enrolment of estimated blind children and youth - as high as 35.9% in Singapore and 23.2% in Malaysia. The next best enrolled group are the hearing handicapped - 9.2% in Singapore and 4.4% in Malaysia. Each of the other exceptional groups has an enrolment of only 2.5% or less.

In terms of the proportion of estimated blind, deaf, mentally retarded, physically handicapped and children with behavioural problems enrolled in special education programs, Singapore leads in each of them. The Philippines is the only country under study that has formal special education classes for speech defectives. In terms of absolute numbers (excluding the mentally gifted) deaf children and youth have the biggest enrolment in Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand, while the Philippines has the largest absolute number of mentally retarded enrolled.

The overall female enrolment has been disappointing and varies from as low as 36.2% in Malaysia and as high as 42.1% in the Philippines. (See Table 4, p.10).

In all the four countries except Singapore there has been a slight but perceptible improvement in the sex ratio in the last few years. However, the relative low female enrolment among the mentally gifted in the Philippines (38.7%) - the lowest among five categories of exceptional students enrolled in that country - is a matter of grave concern in the development of potential leaders and scientists in the Republic. Surprisingly too is the fact that the female enrolment among the physically handicapped in Thailand is only 20.6% whereas in four other exceptional groups, the female component exceeds 38%.

Special Teacher Preparation Programs

Only Malaysia and the Philippines have regular full-time one-year teacher education courses for teachers of the blind and the deaf. The former has just begun full-time training of teachers of slow learners while the latter has also programs for training teachers of the mentally gifted, the mentally retarded and children with behavior problems.

Administration and Finance

In terms of the number of officers at ministerial/departmental level available for administrating and supervising enrolled exceptional children and youth, Singapore has the most favorable ratio (1:556), followed by the Philippines (1:860), Peninsular Malaysia (1:838) and Thailand (1:1451). The Philippines is the only country that conducts regular formal training courses for administrators and supervisors of special education. The largest proportion of fully-government supported programs is in Thailand (81.3%) and the least is in Singapore (21.1%). Two categories of exceptional children invariably receive full government assistance - the mentally gifted and leprous children or children of leprous parents. When special education allocation/expenditure is expressed as a percentage of general education allocation/expenditure, the order of relative decreasing investment is as follows - the Philippines (0.72%), Thailand (0.44%), Peninsular Malaysia (0.29%) and Singapore (0.17%). Almost

the same order is maintained when the government cost of educating an exceptional child is compared with that of a normal child - 7.6 times more in the Philippines, 3.6 times in Peninsular Malaysia, 3.0 times in Thailand and 0.8 times in Singapore. The annual rate of increase in allocation in special education vis-a-vis general education is less in each country.

In conclusion it may be said that although special education in each of the four countries under review has made relatively great strides in the last few decades, the actual overall effect is that it barely scratches the surface of the problem. Many exceptional children have not been unidentified and their special needs have not been met. Unless there is quantitative and qualitative expansion in special education services, disabled and disadvantaged children will likely to become economic, social and cultural liabilities and the mentally gifted wasted and unproductive assets to any nation. Governments must be prepared to spend more on special education per pupil vis-a-vis education in general as the N.E.A. (1960) so aptly describes it: "There is nothing sc unequal as the equal treatment of unequals."

References

Chua, Tee Tee: 'Some Aspects of Special Education in Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and the Philippines: a Comparative Study,' unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Malaya, 1976, 664pp. with 51 tables and 21 figures.

N.E.A. (National Education Association). Administration: Procedures and School Practices for the Academically Talented Student in the Secondary School. Washington, D.C., 1960, 14.

TABLE 1

POSSIBLE PREVALENCE RATES AND ESTIMATED NUMBERS OF SELECTED GROUPS OF EXCEPTIONAL INDIVIDUALS IN MALAYSIA, SINGAPORE, THE PHILIPPINES AND THAILAND, 1972

Country			Malaysia	Singapore	Philippines	Thailand
Estimated Mid-1972 Population[1]			10,944,000	2,147,000	39,040,0000	36,286,000
	Type of Exceptionality	Possible Prevalence Rate (%)[2]	ESTIMATED NUMBER			
(i)	Blind	0.25	27,380	5,368	97,600	90,715
(ii)	Deaf	2	218,880	42,940	780,800	725,720
(iii)	Physically Handicapped e.g. Crippled & Cerebral-palsied	5	547,200	107,350	1,952,000	1,814,300
(iv)	Mentally Subnormal	2	218,880	42,940	780,800	725,720
(v)	Epileptic	1	109,440	21,470	390,400	362,860
	Sub-total	10.25	1,121,760	220,068	4,001,600	3,719,315
(vi)	Mentally Gifted	5.5	601,920	118,085	2,147,200	1,995,730
	Grand Total	15.75	1,723,680	338,153	6,148,800	5,715,045

References

[1] United Nations, Population and Vital Statistics Report: Data available as of 1 April 1974 and Special Supplement, Vol.26, No.2, New York, 1974, pp.18-22.

[2] Supporting evidence as indicated in Chua Tee Tee (1976), p.386.

TABLE 2

POSSIBLE PREVALENCE RATES AND ESTIMATED NUMBERS OF SELECTED GROUPS OF EXCEPTIONAL CHILDREN AND YOUTH AGED 5 TO 19 YEARS IN MALAYSIA, SINGAPORE, THE PHILLIPINES AND THAILAND, 1972

Country		Malaysia	Singapore	Philippines	Thailand
Estimated mid-1972 Population[1]		10,944,000	2,147,000	39,040,000	36,286,000
Percentage of Population aged 5 - 19 years[2]		40.0	38.3	36.6	38.4
Estimated Population aged 5 - 19 years		4,127,720	815,278	13,426,527	13,518,178
Type of Exceptionality	Possible Prevalence Rate (%) for Population aged 5-19 years[3]	ESTIMATED NUMBER			
(i) Blind	0.04	1,651	326	5,370	5,407
(ii) Deaf	0.48	18,987	3,750	61,762	62,184
(iii) Physically Handicapped e.g. Crippled and Cerebral-palsied	1.45	59,852	11,822	194,684	196,014
(iv) Mentally Subnormal	1.46	60,264	11,903	196,027	197,366
(v) Speech Defectives	5	206,385	40,765	671,325	675,910
(vi) Children with Behavioral Problems	5.5	227,025	44,842	738,458	743,501
(vii) Epileptic	0.37	15,272	3,017	49,678	50,017
Sub-total	14.28	589,436	116,425	1,917,304	1,930,399
(viii) Mentally Gifted	5.5	227,025	44,842	738,458	743,501
Grand Total	19.78	816,460	161,267	2,655,762	2,673,900

References

[1] United Nations, Population and Vital Statistics Report: Data available as of 1 April 1974 and Special Supplement, Vol.26, No.2, New York, 1974, pp.18-22.

[2] Ibid., collated from pp.60-65

[3] Supporting evidence as indicated in Chua Tee (1976), pp.373-384.

TABLE 3

NUMBER AND PERCENTAGE OF ESTIMATED CHILDREN AND YOUTH AGED 5-19 YEARS ENROLLED IN SPECIAL EDUCATION/TRAINING PROGRAMMES BY TYPE OF EXCEPTIONALITY IN MALAYSIA, SINGAPORE, THE PHILIPPINES AND THAILAND

Type of Exceptionality	MALAYSIA			SINGAPORE			PHILIPPINES			THAILAND		
	1972			1972			1972/73			1973		
	Actual Enrolment	Estimated No.	% Enrolled	Actual Enrolment	Estimated No.	% Enrolled	Actual Enrolment	Estimated No.	% Enrolled	Actual Enrolment	Estimated No.	% Enrolled
(i) Blind	382	1,651	23.2	117	326	35.9	415	5,370	7.7	231	5,407	4.3
(ii) Deaf	832	18,987	4.4	344	3,750	9.2	1,214	61,762	2.0	902	62,184	1.5
(iii) Physically Handicapped, e.g Crippled and Cerebral-palsied	341	59,852	0.6	234	11,822	2.0	128	194,684	0.1	291	196,014	0.1
(iv) Mentally Subnormal	190	60,264	0.3	298	11,903	2.5	2,141	1196,027	1.1	477	197,366	0.2
(v) Speech Defectives	N	206,285	N	N	40,765	N	158	671,325	0.02	N	675,910	N
(vi) Children with Behavioural Problems	N	227,025	N	98	44,842	0.2	510	738,458	0.07	N	743,501	N
(vii) Epileptic	21	15,272	0.1	N	3,017	N	N	49,678	N	N	50,017	N
Sub-total	1,767	589,436	0.30	1,091	116,426	0.94	4,566	1,917,304	0.24	1,901	1,930,399	0.10
(viii) Mentally Gifted	3,610	277,025	1.59	N	44,842	N	3,177	738,458	0.43	N	743,501	N
Grand total	5,377	816,460	0.66	1,091	161,267	0.68	7,743	2,655,762	0.29	1,901	2,673,900	0.07

Reference

N - No formal organized special classes.

Source

Chua Tee Tee (1976), pp.387 - 392.

TABLE 4

PERCENTAGE OF FEMALE ENROLMENT IN SPECIAL SCHOOLS AND PROGRAMMES BY TYPE OF EXCEPTIONALITY IN MALAYSIA, SINGAPORE, THE PHILIPPINES AND THAILAND

TYPE OF EXCEPTIONALITY	MALAYSIA			SINGAPORE			PHILIPPINES		THAILAND	
	1964	1968	1972	1964	1968	1972	1951/52	1972/73	1952	1973
(i) Blind	30.2	34.1	34.7	36.8	36.7	35.0	31.0	40.0	39.4	40.3
(ii) Deaf	39.1	38.7	36.4	43.9	42.4	45.3	36.2	47.4	20.0	38.6
(iii) Physically Handicapped e.g. Crippled and Cerebral-palsied	29.4	43.5	39.0	47.5	50.0	40.6	NA	49.6	N	20.6
(iv) Mentally subnormal	NA	NIL	30.0	NA	35.0	31.1	NA	45.1	N	45.5
(v) Mentally Gifted	NA	NA	NA	N	N	N	NA	38.7	N	N
(vi) Leprous children or children of Leprous Parents	28.4	28.8	42.0	34.3	40.6	35.0	NA	NA	NA	45.2
(vii) Epileptic	-	75.0	57.1	N	N	N	N	N	N	N
Total	33.8	35.9	36.2	41.2	40.7	40.4	35.4	42.1	35.5	40.8

References

N = No formal organized classes.

NA = Information not available for particular year.

Source

Chua Tee Tee (1976), pp.403-406.